

Natalie Blayne

BY ALICE BROWN

IT was a most gentle autumn day, full of beguiling promise. The earth smelled good from ripened chalice. The mist hung in the distance like an enchanted censer-cloud, and no air stirred. This was the top note of fruition, so subtly mingled with hope that the human heart had to be heavy indeed not to rejoice in it.

Old Madam Gilbert lay in an upper chamber sick nearly to death; and no one knew her ailment. She had taken to her bed two weeks before, and languished there, not saying a word beyond quiet commonplaces, but with her dark eyes following her husband piteously as he walked about the room doing little services for her. As time went on he seemed to be superseding the nurse, because, as he and his wife both knew, he could translate her wishes better than anybody else. Now she was growing swiftly weaker, as if unseen wings were wafting her out of life.

"Is there anything on her mind?" the doctor asked her husband when he took his leave that day.

"No! no!" said old Ralph Gilbert, with all the certainty of his gentle heart. It hardly seemed worth while to fret either of them by asking that. He knew her life from sunrising to dusk through these difficult days, as he had known it every day for forty years. At night they had slept in like security of unison, one wrinkled hand clasped upon the other. Their hours had been like precious fragments welded into one.

"No," said he, "there is nothing on her mind."

"Queer!" muttered the doctor, with a puzzled frown. "There's nothing the matter with her, yet she's slipping down hill. I'll come to-morrow."

Ralph Gilbert stood for a moment in the doorway, looking out on the sweep of lawn and the noble trees that were all his—and hers. A sob came into his

throat, and the air wavered before him. It was not possible that the final word had been spoken to their blended life together. The doubt, the hint of change, at once made that life ineffably precious to him, and he turned and went up the stairs in haste, like a boy, knowing there would be time enough for grieving afterwards. Delia, his wife, lay high upon the pillows in the great south room where the sun slept placidly on the chintz-covered chairs and old-fashioned settings. Her delicate profile looked sharp, and the long black lashes softened her eyes pathetically. Her gray hair went curling in a disordered mass up from the top of her head like a crown. She was a wonderful old creature, with a beauty full of meaning and suggestion, transcending that of bloom and color. Her husband, standing there by the bedside, subtly resembled her. He was rather slight, and his fine old face, though it lacked the intensity of hers, had a mobile charm. He put one hand on hers, lying in ringed distinction outside the sheet.

"Dear," said he, an extremity of love in his voice, "don't you feel any better?"

"I feel very well, dear," answered the old wife, in a tone as thrilling as her face.

"But you don't eat, dear!"

"I eat all I can. I need very little, lying here."

"Diana will be here to-night."

"Yes. That will be good."

He sat down by the bed-side, and, like a faithful dog, refused to leave her, though she besought him not to miss his dinner. The nurse came and brought her a glass of something, but after a few teaspoonfuls she refused to swallow.

"I can't," she said. "It chokes me. Ralph, won't you go down to dinner?"

"No, dear," said the old man; "if you can't eat, I can't."

He bowed his head upon her hand,



Half tone plate engraved by A. Lockhardt

"QUEER!" MUTTERED THE DOCTOR, WITH A PUZZLED FROWN

and she felt his tears. So, to please him, she tried again to drink; and seeing what poor work she made of it, and how it distressed her to try, he yielded and went down. Then she rested while the light faded, and in the early evening he brought Diana up to her. Diana, entering the room, dwarfed them both by her size, her deep-chested, long-limbed majesty, her goddess walk. She was a redundant creature in all that pertains to the comfort of life. She looked wifehood and motherhood in one. Her shoulder was a happy place for a cheek. Her brown eyes were full of fun and sorrow. Her crimping hair was good for baby hands to pull. She went swiftly up to Madam Gilbert, and touching her very gently, seemed to take her into her heart and arms.

"You lamb!" said she.

"There, Delia, now!" cried Ralph Gilbert, as if it were an efficacious thing to be called a lamb. Aunt Delia put up a languid hand to the firm, red cheek.

"Diana!" said she, "that's nice."

"I expect you'd like to have her stay with you an hour or two to-night," suggested the old man. "I shall be here too, Delia. Right round the corner." He pointed to the dressing-room where he had lain ever since she fell ill, stirring at a breath.

"Yes," said his wife. "You stay, Diana. Yes, Ralph, I know you'll be here."

"It puzzles me," said Diana later to her uncle, when they stood in the hall below, while the nurse made ready for the night. "There's nothing the matter with her, but she seems struck with—she seems strange."

The old man's face fell into the lines of a grief she could hardly meet.

"That's like Delia," said he, solemnly. "She won't go like anybody else. It won't be sickness. She'll waste away."

"But I don't see—" began Diana, perplexedly. "Well, never mind. I'll stay with her to-night, and maybe in the morning we can tell."

At nine o'clock she was installed with full prerogative in the chintz-gardened room. The nurse went to bed, and Uncle Gilbert camped on his temporary couch. He was very tired, and when Diana heard the breathing that betoken-

ed sleep, she softly shut the door upon him and returned to her great high-shouldered chair, just beyond Aunt Delia's gaze. The lamp burned low, a pin-speck in the moonlight, and the few embers broke and fell together on the hearth. The time went on for an hour, and she was conscious that Aunt Delia did not sleep, but lay there in an acute watchfulness like her own. At eleven Diana stole out of her chair to feed her, and found the great eyes wide open in the half-light as if they had lost all power of closing. Diana never failed to enrich the life about her through lack of words. To her mind the gracious and loving thing must be said, lest there remain no time for saying it.

"Dear heart!" she whispered. "What's the matter with you? The doctor doesn't know. You do! I know you do. You tell. Tell Diana, dearie. Diana's nobody."

"Move your chair a little nearer," said the old lady. "Towards the foot. There, so! Maybe I'll tell you, if I can. How long were you married, dear?"

Diana's hand went to her throat, where the blue wrapper fell away and showed a noble contour. She had never got used to her grief, that unmated mourning like the bird bereft when summer is at flood and the other creature is mysteriously lost in a clear heaven.

"Only two years," she said.

"Two years," said the old lady, musingly. "And I have been married forty-one. You missed a great deal, Diana."

"Yes, I missed a great deal."

"You had the happiness of it, but you missed growing into his likeness and finding him growing into yours. I have had forty-one years."

"We won't have a golden wedding," said Diana, at random. "That's too much publicity. But I'll come and crown both of you with vine leaves in the garden, and uncle will reel off Horace, and we'll drink Hippocrene. I don't know what Hippocrene is, but it sounds very delirious, and it's none too good for wedding-days."

It was a change indeed when Aunt Delia forbore to smile at her foolishness, but the dark eyes still looked solemnly forth into the shadows, and she said, musingly:



Half-tone plate engraved by W. H. Clark

"IT PUZZLES ME," SAID DIANA

"I hoped it would be a good many more years, so that one of us wouldn't have long to stay alone. But we can't tell, we can't tell."

Diana felt the unyieldingness of the situation. Here was a difficulty which was no difficulty, and yet it seemed impervious.

"Dear," said she, "you tell Diana all about it." She put her warm hand over the frail old one, and Aunt Delia turned a little on her pillow, and, as it seemed, snuggled into a confidential frame of mind.

"I was not very young when I met your uncle, dear," said she, "not as things went then. I was twenty-seven. Now, I believe it is different. Women are as old as they behave now. It wasn't the same in my day."

"We're as old as our ambitions now," said Diana. "However, we're not very partial to crows'-feet and double chins, I've noticed. Well, dear?"

"Your uncle was very attractive. You know that, of course?"

"Yes, auntie. He's always been an old dear."

"He wasn't an *old* dear then," said her aunt, in delicate reproof. "He was a very high-spirited young man, working hard at the law, and singing a great deal, and reading the classics in the evening. I am proud of your uncle's youth. He was a poor boy, and he made himself a name."

"Yes, dear," said Diana, tentatively, when she paused. "Take a sup of wine. You mustn't talk too much."

"It does me good," said the old lady, with zest. "I'm going to tell you something that has lain in my mind for over forty years. They say women can't keep secrets. I've kept this one. You'll keep it, too, Diana. You'll understand, and see you can't ever tell. You know, my dear, your uncle has a very poetic mind. He is full of fun, but never to the detriment of his ideals."

Diana stopped herself in time from saying again that he was an old dear. She thought she knew exactly what kind of a youth Uncle Ralph's had been: hot-headed, erratic, full of impossible ambitions trained into working forces by his mate.

"When we met," said Aunt Delia, "it

was like the great stories. We recognized each other. We saw it had got to be. Your uncle was too poor to marry, but—my dear, I felt from the first as if I were his wife already."

"I know," said Diana, softly. "I know."

"I was perfectly happy until a week before our wedding-day. Then one evening we were sitting in the garden. It was just such weather as this. I could smell the grapes. I hoped to put up my own preserves this year. Well! well! Somehow—I don't know how it came about—I mentioned Natalie Blayne. She was a girl a good deal younger than I, and she came here for a visit. I had seen her two or three times, but she never made much impression on me. Well, I spoke her name. 'Natalie Blayne!' said your uncle. 'Natalie Blayne!'" Madam Gilbert sat up in bed, and her voice rang dramatically. Diana saw that she was forgotten, and that the other woman was acting out a scene which had played itself in her memory many a time. "'Do you know her?' said I. His eyes grew very bright. His face changed, my dear. 'Natalie Blayne!' said he. 'I saw her for an hour, a year and a half ago. She came into Judge Blayne's office, and he sent me out with her to find columbines in the meadow. I liked her better at first sight than any woman I ever saw.'"

"But, auntie!"

"No, dear," said Madam Gilbert, conclusively, as one who has long ago settled that disputed point, "he didn't even know he said it. Somehow we were on such terms that he never had to put a guard upon his lips with me. 'But didn't you try to see her again?' said I. 'No,' said he; 'how could I? I was a poor boy in Judge Blayne's office. Besides, she was going abroad the next week.' 'So you lost her?' said I. He took my hand, and said the fingers were cold. Then he went on talking about what he calls potential mates. You know, my dear, he thinks there are many people we recognize instinctively when we meet them. They have a kinship with us. Sometimes it is explained. Sometimes it never is. These are our potential mates. You've heard him talk about it?"

"Of course I have," said Diana. "The dear old simpleton!"

"What, dear?"

"Yes, I've heard him talk. Go on."

"Well, I went to bed that night thinking my wedding-day was coming in a week, and that somehow, without any pain to him, I'd got to break it all off. Because he'd liked Natalie Blayne better than any girl he ever saw in his life, I knew I'd got to get her for him."

"But, auntie!" said Diana, despairingly. "Auntie!"

"Yes, my dear, I know. You think I was unreasonable. But those things have always been very sacred to me. I believe in the one true mate—there are many others too, my dear; I don't deny that—but one true one. And if it was Natalie Blayne!" She sat there in her white bed, looking forward with eyes so moving in their childlike pathos that Diana's heart yearned over her. But she despaired of comforting anything so frail yet so invincible, so capable of pain.

"Aunt Delia," said she, in futile rallying, "here you are, uncle's commanding officer and mine, with power of life and death over us, and yet you're nothing but a baby. How can you suffer so?"

In her loneliness such conjuring seemed like tempting Heaven. If the man she loved could walk the earth again, he might moan over potential mates by the battalion, so that she only put the cup to his lips and touched his hand.

"I made up my mind to it," said Madam Gilbert, "and next day—my dear, it was like a tragedy!—word came that Natalie Blayne was married. Whatever I did, he couldn't have her, after all."

"There!" Diana said, whole-heartedly, "*she* was disposed of."

"I told him myself," said the old lady. "I told him in the garden. I thought it might be a blow. I didn't want him to hear it from anybody else. 'Natalie Blayne is married,' I said. I couldn't look at him. Just then mother called from the window, and your uncle never had to answer me at all. But he went away quite early that day."

"Well, I should hope he did! Six days before his wedding! He went to buy the ring. I know!"

"Then I was tempted," continued the old lady, fiercely, "and I yielded. What I really felt was this: 'If there is another woman in the world to whom he

turns, I won't marry him.' But then I said, 'He can't have her. Let him take me. I'd rather be second best with him than first in heaven.'"

"Good for you, auntie! That's the way to talk."

"So we were married, and I kept on caring more and more and more and more; and so did he; and he was happy, and I was too. But all the time Natalie Blayne stood between us. I had a terrible feeling as if I had stolen him from her, and the time must come when they would meet, in some other world, and he'd say, 'Why, here you are, my mate!'"

"O you poor little child!" cried Diana. "You poor little tragic, foolish child!"

"My dear, I have always held those things very sacred. But at last I began to forget her; and then, five years after she was married, her husband died, and the story ran that she was coming home to live with old Judge Blayne."

"But surely you didn't think—"

"Oh no, my dear! He was too good, he was too honorable ever to have looked away from me. But don't you see, if he hadn't married me, he could have had her, after all."

Diana chafed a little under this theory of Uncle Ralph's invincibility. "You don't seem to consider," she ventured to suggest, "that Natalie Blayne may have been devoted to her husband's memory."

"I do, my dear, I do. But if they were mates, your uncle and she, why, she might recognize it this time, and that other marriage would have been only an episode."

"Now, I'll tell you," said Diana, "I begin to be a little sorry for Natalie Blayne. You bandied her about in a pretty fashion. She might as well have been that slave girl they wrangled over in the Trojan War."

"Well, she came, but only for a visit. Your uncle was away, it happened. I saw her. She was quite tall, with wonderful red hair. It curled. Red hair never turns gray, you know."

"It does worse," muttered Diana. "But never mind."

"I looked at her as I never had before. She had a lovely mouth. The upper lip was short and made a little pout, yet it wasn't a small mouth either.

Her teeth were white as milk. Her hair grew in a little peak on her forehead. Her clothes were made in Paris. The long veil—my dear, she was slender, but that veil made her majestic.”

Diana put her arms out and drew the rocking figure to her heart, but not to keep it there. Aunt Delia needed no woman’s comforting: only that of the man who in her despairing fancy had been her soul and flesh and yet not wholly hers. Diana felt for her an agony of pity. Her grief seemed at once so tragic, so compounded of the spiritual jealousies and renunciations that take hold on life and death, and at the same time of the lesser pangs that make up sexual cruelties.

“Well, she went away,” said Madam Gilbert; “but I heard about her. She studied music—she’d always played well—and now she went to Germany and worked very hard. She played quite wonderfully, sometimes in public. I never played. Your uncle was always fond of music. So there she stood between us until—she must have been forty then—she married again. Her name is Meredith.”

“Oh, so she married again! Well, she seems not to have shrunk from experiments.”

“Oh, but, my dear, doesn’t that prove they were experiments? If she had married her true mate—and if I had not married your uncle, you see he would have been free—well! well!”

Diana thought she knew a good deal about womankind, but for the first time she began to penetrate the tortuous course of woman’s jealousy.

“But why on earth didn’t you say this to uncle?” she urged, in one final despair. “I’d have said it to Jack. I’d have put my two hands on his shoulders and pinned him to the wall, and said: ‘Out with it! Do you want Natalie Blayne? You can’t have her; but be a man! speak up and tell! Do you want her?’”

“Your uncle was different, my dear. So am I different. And perhaps if you had been married longer you would have learned this: we must never let them see we can be hurt by what has happened. If they do, they keep things from us. They shut up certain chambers and lock

the door. And it isn’t that we want to go in there, dear; but it hurts us to think we have pushed them even a hair’s-breadth away. We want to live so near them—so near—so near!”

“But, little Delia, don’t you see you’ve been building up a wall between you all these years? Out of nothing, too!—a wall out of nothing! Uncle Ralph sat there in the garden and got mooning. I’ve heard him. He loves the sound of his own voice. He adores being a sort of Heine’s lyric. And out of that innocent folly of his you pieced together a hair shirt, and you’ve been wearing it ever since!”

“He was quite honest,” said Madam Gilbert, solemnly. “‘I liked her better at first sight,’ he said, ‘than any woman I ever saw.’ It meant so much to him that he quite forgot me when he said it. It was like saying it to himself.”

“But, dear heart, how many men have been bowled over by women they wouldn’t take the gift of for keeps?”

“It may be so now, Diana, but it wasn’t so in my day. We thought very differently of those things.”

Diana pored again over the situation, which, as her amazed mind told her, was no situation at all. “But think of it!” she cried. “You’re digging all this up now when you and Uncle Ralph are—” She was about to say “old people,” but she stopped. The other woman seemed to be at that moment pathetically young. “Why not forget it?”

Again Madam Gilbert rose up in bed. Her pale cheeks wore each a tiny fever spot.

“Because she’s coming here!”

“Natalie Blayne?”

“Natalie Meredith. She’s a widow, and she’s coming here to see the Blaynes.”

“A widow! History repeats itself. But, auntie, in the name of Heaven! Why, the woman must be—” Still, as she instantly reminded herself, this drama had nothing to do with years, and she forbore.

“It’s only that I haven’t the spirit to meet it now,” said Madam Gilbert, faintly. “I hardly had it years ago; but now I am an old woman. I realize it. My hair is white. See how big the veins are in my hands!”

"Never mind! Uncle is older than you are!"

But this was no answer, and Diana knew it. She was talking to a woman whose passion was welling from the exhaustless fountain it had sprung from in her youth.

"Well," said Diana, "we're sure of one thing. You must go to sleep. Drink this. Yes, you must. You don't want uncle to behead me in the morning."

When the old lady was settling down among her pillows she opened her eyes wide again and said, fiercely: "But it's unjust. It's one of God's injustices. I gave everything I had. He is my husband. I want him in this world, in the world to come. And she's always stood between us."

"Don't think of it now, dear. Don't try to account for anything. Let it all go."

"That's why I told you, Diana. And don't let me see her. I'm not strong enough. Let your uncle see her if she comes—all he can, dear, all he can. But keep her away from me."

She fell into fluttering sleep, and Diana, watching while the cold dawn painted the sky, reflected upon the strangeness of life. Diana never split hairs. Again it seemed to her incredible that any woman who could live beside the man she loved should treasure cobwebs such as these. To sit at table with a man, to see him come home at night—these were the solid joys she coveted. Then with a sigh she began to muse again over this flimsy tissue woven from a dream.

Next morning Uncle Ralph came in in haste, so renewed by sleep that it seemed amazing not to find his Delia better. He regarded her with some pathos of rebuke, and she smiled wanly back at him.

"It's really ridiculous," said she. "I am an old fool, but I can't help it."

Diana breakfasted with him, and then put on her hat without delay. It took more than one night's wakefulness to destroy her bloom, and she was very sweet and wholesome as she stood at the front door surveying the morning, her uncle sadly there beside her.

"I'm going to have a little walk," said she. "That will set me up. Better than sleep, oh, dear, yes! Don't tell her I'm

out of the house, will you? As for you, uncle—well, if I were you, I'd spend most of my time making love to her."

"I always have done that," said the old man, simply. "I suppose you mean, Diana"—his voice broke—"I suppose you mean I'd better make the most of every minute, now."

Diana turned upon him. "Don't let yourself think of such a thing!" she said, angrily. "Die! Aunt Delia die! She's good for twenty years, if we've got any sense about us. But I tell you this: we've got to clutch her petticoats and drag her back."

Diana went down the garden walk, looking very splendid, as if she and the morning were in league together. In an hour she came back, all radiance and bloom. Her brown hair was curled the tighter from her haste, the red in her cheeks had deepened as if the sun had sunken into it. Little darts had awakened in her eyes and played about her mouth.

"Heavens, Diana! what's happened?" asked her uncle when she walked into the sick-room. "Who's left you a fortune?"

"Nobody," said Diana, in great tenderness putting her cheek to the invalid's hand. "They've left it to Aunt Delia. It's a pot of gold."

"Enough to make her very rich?" said Uncle Ralph. He liked to play at fairy-tales.

"Rich! I should think so. Not a competency, not your old annuities, but rich forever and two days after."

Then she sent her uncle out to walk, exiled the nurse, and assumed her reign again. All that forenoon she took perfect care of the invalid. She gave her food by the smallest quantities, and left her long intervals in quiet. After luncheon she sat down by the bed-side and held Aunt Delia's hand.

"Sweetheart," said she, "what do you think I did this morning? I took a walk. My shoe hurt me, and I went into the Blayne girls' to rest. They were just getting up from the breakfast table. I saw Natalie Meredith."

"Diana!"

"Yes, dear, I did. I couldn't help it, could I? Didn't my shoe pinch me? Dear, I could have wept. I did laugh.

I went into a gale. They said you must find me excellent company!"

"So you have seen Natalie Blayne!" said the old lady, wonderingly.

"Yes. I've seen Natalie Blayne, and she's no sight at all. I hoped to find her a monster, rotund, busked, glittering in jet,—but she's not. No; she's simply a very well preserved woman, with great evidence of facial massage and a look of exquisite care. Oh, she was pretty! I can see that. She's pretty still. Her hair isn't such a glory as you describe, but it's lovely hair. She's got white hands that look as if they could play anything anybody ever wrote, and a great many rings on them. But, dear me, sweetheart! she's only a woman, after all. You've exalted her into something between a Cleopatra and a seraph. She's nothing of the kind."

Aunt Delia was looking steadily out at the red and gold maple-tops, a solemn sadness on her face. Diana began to wish she had caricatured Natalie Blayne.

"Well, dear," said Madam Gilbert, presently, "I'm glad you've seen her. I hope it won't come in my way. And we mustn't talk about her any more."

That afternoon at four o'clock Diana sent the nurse to walk, and left her uncle in the sick-room. She took up her own station on the veranda, and sat there until Natalie Meredith came up the garden path. Diana went to meet her, and the stately woman greeted her with a simple grace.

"I feel as if I had deceived you," said Diana, sweetly. "I told you Aunt Delia would be cheered by visitors, and now she proves to be too tired. I'm so sorry. But Uncle Ralph wants cheering, too, poor dear! Let me call him. Talk to him, do! Draw him out of himself!"

Natalie Meredith was exactly what Diana had painted her, save, perhaps, a shade more telling. She was the product of a high civilization, charming by nature, and with another charm added to that. She talked well, yet with a sympathetic regard to her listener; she was one of the women who take the active share of entertainment upon themselves. Presently Diana rose, with a pretty air of apology.

"You must let me call uncle," said she.

When she entered the upper room he

was sitting by his Delia's side, pathetically essaying the nonsense that, in lighter seasons, made his joy.

"Uncle," said Diana, "I wish you'd come down and talk to a caller. I don't know what to do with her. She is a Mrs. Meredith. She's visiting at the Blaynes'." A hot look throbbed into Madam Gilbert's eyes, but she kept them steadfastly on the tree-tops.

"Meredith? Meredith?" said Uncle Ralph, fractiously. "I don't know any Meredith."

"Why, yes, Ralph, yes!" put in his wife, eagerly. "You know her—Natalie Blayne!"

"Natalie Blayne? Oh yes! She was one of the granddaughters. Heavens, Diana! didn't you tell her your aunt is sick and we're not seeing people?"

"Why, it's Natalie Blayne!" insisted the old lady. Her voice had a piercing quality he had never heard in it, her sombre eyes besought him. "Why, you remember, Ralph! It was summer, and you walked with her in the columbine meadow."

The old man turned on her a look of piteous apprehension. Then he spoke very gently, as we speak to those in pain: "Yes, dear, yes! I don't remember, but I dare say I did."

"You don't remember?"

"No, dear, but I've no doubt it's just as you say. Diana, you run down and tell her to go home. She must be a fool to come at a time like this."

"No! no!" cried Madam Gilbert. "No! you go down, Ralph. You must go. I insist upon it."

Diana got him out of the room and down the stairs. Meantime she whispered to him: "Does she seem to you as well, uncle? Is she sinking?"

"Don't say that!" cried the old man, sharply. "Don't say that! Let me get rid of this Meredith woman—"

Natalie Meredith stayed a long time. She liked to talk, and, as she justly thought, these two anxious people needed cheering. She told them a great deal about Germany and the music there, the charted freedom and the atmosphere of pleasure. She did it very gracefully and sweetly, while Uncle Ralph rumbled his hair and fidgeted. So it went on until Diana, warned by the sympathetic ten-

sion of her own mind, grew keenly alive to the troubled spirit in that upper room.

"Uncle," said she, with her innocent air of sudden thought, "we've forgotten Aunt Delia's little powder. It's ten minutes late."

Uncle Ralph flew out of the room and up the stairs. When he saw his wife she was sitting up in bed, her eyes turned toward the door. She seemed to be watching in an agonized apprehension for what a step might bring. The old man hurried to her side and put his arms about her. He forgot the powder, for looking at her face. She was his Delia.

"There, there, honey!" he soothed her, as he had for over forty years. "You lie down. Diana'll be up in a minute, as soon as that woman knows enough to go."

He laid her back on the pillow and gave her the medicine. She took it obediently, looking at him all the time in an incredulous seeking.

"There, Ralph!" she whispered. "Now go down again."

"Go down? I won't! Her tongue's hung in the middle. She talks a blue streak."

"But, Ralph, it's Natalie Blayne!"

"I don't care if it's old Judge Blayne himself. She's a bore."

"Dear, how does she look?"

"Well enough, I guess. Too much

rigged out for a widow! Sheep dressed lamb fashion!"

"But, Ralph, shouldn't you have known her? Does she remind you— Oh, you remember Natalie Blayne!"

"Why, yes, of course I do! The old judge sent me to the depot to meet her, or something. How he used to rope me in! I went there to study law, and he made me black his boots. But I should have said that girl had brown hair and brown eyes, something like yours, dear, only not so pretty. This one's hair is copper-color. I dare say she does some ungodly thing to it."

Upon the silence that followed this, Diana came in. "She's gone," announced Diana.

"Thank God!" rejoined her uncle, fervently.

Diana looked at Madam Gilbert for one solemn moment, and then the two women began to laugh. Aunt Delia laughed until she cried a little, in a happy fashion, and Diana put her arms about her, cooing and calling her a lamb.

"Here, uncle," said Diana, "you've got her back. In a week she'll be putting up preserves."

Madam Gilbert looked extraordinarily pretty and shy, and flushed like a girl.

"You lay out my clothes, Diana," said she, happily; "I'm going to get up to dinner."